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Linkage and leverage effects on Moldova's Transnistria problem

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ABSTRACT

What is the impact of geopolitical competition on conflict resolution and democratisation in the context of extensive and multi-directional linkages and leverage? Our analysis demonstrates of the Moldova and its Transnistrian conflict demonstrates that state weakness simultaneously provides the scope for external leverage and limits its effects. The EU (and US), on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, have used their respective leverage relative to their level of cooperation or rivalry in the wider global context. Long existing and newly built linkages channel this geopolitical relationship which remains the main factor in conflict management and democratisation in Moldova.

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Introduction

Why has there been no substantial progress towards the resolution of any of the so-called “frozen conflicts” almost a quarter of a century since the demise of the Soviet Union despite considerable efforts by the UN, the OSCE, the EU, and the US? This is an important question to answer because the persistence of these conflicts poses a continuing security challenge in an area of increasingly intense geopolitical competition between Russia and the West¹ that has become ever more acute since the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine. The Transnistrian conflict in Moldova is one of a number of these so-called “frozen conflicts” in the post-Soviet Russian periphery, including also Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagornyi Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and more recently also Luhansk/Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. While none of these conflicts are exactly the same and while they have followed different trajectories since their emergence from the late-1980s onwards, there are sufficient similarities between them to treat them as manifestations of a particular type of conflict involving unrecognised, de-facto states in the post-Communist region of Europe (Caspersen 2009; Fawn 2008; Hill 2010; Lynch 2004; Lynch 2007) and beyond (Bahcheli, Bartmann, and Srebrnik 2004; Caspersen, Stansfield, and Stansfield 2010; Caspersen 2011).

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By applying the concepts of linkage and leverage (Levitsky and Way 2005; Levitsky and Way 2006), we argue that it is the relative influence that Russia and the West have in Moldova and Transnistria, and the way in which they exercise it, that is the fundamental reason why, more than two decades after Moldovan independence and the establishment of a de-facto state in Transnistria, there is no reasonable prospect of a settlement in the near future, and that the prospects of achieving one have, in fact, diminished. In other words, we hypothesise that an increase in great-power competition causes diminished prospects for conflict settlement.

The Transnistrian conflict is a useful case study to test this principal hypothesis and develop further explanatory hypotheses that illustrate more clearly the causal mechanisms at work. The period between 2003 and 2015, on which we predominantly focus, provides sufficient variation on our independent variable (competitive influence by great powers) for an in-case comparison: two periods of heightened competition (2003 and 2012–2014) frame a period of tentative rapprochement (2010–2012). We use a combination of process tracing and what van Evera (2015) calls “congruence procedure type 2” to examine the dynamics of the conflict settlement process, specifically the relationship between our independent variable (competitive influence-seeking by Russia and the EU) and our dependent variable the prospects of a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.

We rely on a range of different data sources – participant observation, interviews, official statements, and media. Both authors have had a long-standing involvement with Moldova.² Through this involvement, both authors have first-hand experience with key local and international actors in Chisinau, Tiraspol, and Brussels, conducted interviews with them and participated in numerous events on the conflict settlement process in these locations.³ This provides the rich empirical knowledge on which we base our analysis.

We proceed as follows. After framing our argument theoretically in the regime change literature, we offer a brief chronological narrative on Moldova and Transnistria between Russia and the EU. We then examine comparatively the linkage and leverage that the West and Russia exercise in Moldova and Transnistria, respectively, and assess what impact they have on the dynamics of the Transnistrian conflict. This enables us to draw conclusions at two levels. First, at an empirical level, we conclude that the balance of linkage/leverage between the West and Russia has changed over the past decade in favour of the West, but differently in relation to Moldova and Transnistria. Having failed to secure a favourable settlement to the conflict in 2003, Russia still retains sufficient linkage and leverage on both banks of the River Nistru to block any progress towards an unfavourable settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Second, we find that there is significant analytical purchase in extending the linkage/leverage explanation to investigate the impact of competitive great-power influence on the dynamics of a local conflict.

Linkage, leverage, and geopolitical competition in weak states

Systematically developed by Levitsky and Way (2005), Levitsky and Way (2006), the notions of linkage and leverage have formed the backbone of many explanations of the success and failure of democracy promotion,⁴ and have more recently also been applied to cases of autocracy promotion. They thus offer a useful starting point for any discussion of competing external influences on states undergoing transition processes.⁵

Levitsky and Way (2005) define Western leverage as “authoritarian governments’ vulnerability to external democratizing pressure.” They argue that leverage can be exerted in various ways including political conditionality, punitive sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military intervention. The degree of leverage is determined by at least three factors: the raw size and military strength of the targeted state; whether there are any competing issues on the Western foreign policy agendas relating to this state/region; and whether there is another alternative (regional) power that provides political, economic, or military support (Levitsky and Way 2005, 21f., 27).

Such leverage is most effective when combined with linkage. This is defined as primarily a structural variable, mostly a product of geography, of historical factors such as colonialism and geostrategic alliances, and of long-term processes of social and economic integration. Linkage manifests itself in the extent of a regime’s ties to the US, EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions. There are at least five dimensions of linkage: economic, geopolitical, social, communication, and transnational civil society linkage (Levitsky and Way 2005).

While the original concepts of linkage and leverage were developed with a specific view to democracy-promoting foreign policy efforts of Western actors, they can be, and have been, applied to autocracy promotion as well. Burnell and Schlumberger (2010) were among the first to point out that the importance of international factors in national political regime development was well established in democratisation studies and that similarly relevant international factors were among the potentially crucial factors to explain the resilience and spread of non-democratic rule as well.⁶

Competitive influence-seeking, as we define it here, thus refers to the building of linkages and use of leverage by rival external actors. The interests that underpin the activities of Russia and the West (specifically the EU), in the case of the Transnistrian conflict are their respective attempts to secure stable and friendly countries in their neighbourhood. Competition arises primarily from incompatible notions of “friendliness” in what is in fact a shared neighbourhood that requires countries located there to make a choice in terms of their geopolitical orientation eastward or westward. The level of competition between Russia and the West, our independent variable, is reflected in the incentives and disincentives that they use to influence government policy and public opinion in relation to this geopolitical orientation.

Our dependent variable cannot be easily or usefully “coded” in a binary way either. Rather, we conceive of prospects for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict in terms of the intensity and results of negotiations between Moldova and Transnistria in the framework of the OSCE-led 5 + process (both in formal rounds of negotiations and in the context of 1 + meetings between the chief negotiators, as well as in other formats, such as the so-called Working Groups). This allows us to describe a sufficient degree of variance in our dependent variable even though the conflict has remained unresolved.

We do not seek to explain the reasons for rivalry or fluctuation in the intensity of rivalry, but rather the impact that the resulting competitive influence-seeking has on the prospects of conflict settlement. In other words, we examine first of all co-variation between our independent and dependent variables: if our hypothesis holds, an increase in rivalry between Russia and the West goes hand in hand with diminishing prospects for conflict settlement. Second, we use process tracing to explain how variation in our

independent variable, that is, competitive influence-seeking, causes variation in our dependent variable, that is, prospects for conflict settlement.

Background: Moldova and Transnistria between Russia and the EU

The Transnistrian conflict dates back to the beginning of post-Soviet Moldova's transition process in the early 1990s and has been inextricably linked with it ever since (Gordon 2012; Sasse 2009; Wolff 2012, 2011). Yet, the relationship between the conflict, the transition process, and competing promoters of autocracy and democracy, respectively, is a complicated one. Writing in 2005, Levitsky and Way (2005) characterised Moldova as a country where the West had a *high level of leverage* and a *low level of linkage*, resulting in unstable authoritarian government where elections replace one authoritarian leader with another one – a thesis that is confirmed by the succession of Moldovan presidents in the 1990s and early 2000s: Mircea Snegur (1990–1997), Petru Lucinschi (1997–2001) and Vladimir Voronin (2001–2009). This pattern changed in 2009 when disputed elections that had returned the Communist Party under Voronin to power in April sparked off street demonstrations. Police violence against demonstrators brought a strong reaction from NGOs and Western capitals, and when the Communists failed to secure enough votes in parliament to elect a president, fresh parliamentary elections were held in July 2009. These brought to power a new coalition – the Alliance for European Integration – which defended its parliamentary majority in subsequent elections in 2010 and 2014.

These political changes in Moldova can be well explained with Levitsky and Way's theory: EU linkage and leverage increased significantly compared to the 1990s, enabled not least through the more comprehensive, more strategic, and better funded engagement of the EU with Moldova following the launch of the Union's European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003. The EU and Moldova had already signed a Partnership and Association Agreement in 1998, but a step-change in relations only occurred with the launch of the ENP and the Moldovan Communist Party's greater openness towards closer ties with the Union from 2003 onwards, which resulted in the development and adoption of an ENP Action Plan in 2004/5. Moldova continued its pro-European course following the political changes in 2009, but on a much accelerated pace that saw the country join the European Energy Community in 2010 and conclude an Association Agreement with the EU in June 2014, which also includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA).

Yet, Moldova's expected transition to a more consolidated democracy after 2009 did not follow a simple linear path. EU leverage and linkages were balanced by Russia exercising its own leverage (e.g. import restrictions, gas embargoes, Transnistria) and intensifying linkages (Russian TV, historical and cultural ties). Economically and socially, Moldova remains the poorest country in Europe; the average salary is \$277 a month, the per capita GDP was \$2233 in 2006.⁷ The country's economy has remained weak and vulnerable: Moldova has few natural resources and depends on Russian energy; with a few exceptions, industrial and agricultural output has declined compared to the Soviet era, a trend which has encouraged a nostalgia for this period and expresses itself as a latent linkage to Russia. Entrenched economic inertia has resulted in many of the more active Moldovans going abroad: of a working population of 1.2 million, over one-third are recorded as working outside Moldova.⁸ As a result, the country has become heavily

dependent on remittances from labour migrants. Remittances of around \$2bn annually, dwarf official development aid of just under \$375m (principally from the EU, the US and multinational donor agencies, such as the World Bank and UNDP) and foreign direct investment of \$350m.⁹

Political changes in Chisinau after 2009 were initially not “matched” in Tiraspol, the de-facto capital of Transnistria. Here, the situation remained by and large unchanged for two decades with Igor Smirnov firmly in charge of the break-away territory. However, in 2011 he was forced to concede defeat in the first round of presidential elections. The winner of the second round, and current Transnistrian leader, was Yevgeny Shevchuk, a former Speaker of the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet who defeated the Moscow-backed candidate Anatoliy Kaminski.¹⁰ Russian military presence, Transnistria’s economic dependence, and the social and cultural orientation of the majority of its population towards Moscow have combined over the years to solidify Russia’s hold on the region. In contrast to right-bank Moldova, Transnistria was never part of the Romanian cultural space and its residents are generally fearful of Romanianisation and thus rely on Russia also as a protector of their cultural identity which its leaders have promoted as distinctly Transnistrian, and thus different from the rest of Moldova, for over 20 years.

Against this background, the Transnistrian conflict settlement process has made no tangible progress towards a solution. While there were several periods of intense negotiations when the parties came close to a settlement (especially in the context of the 2003 Kozak Memorandum) and which resulted in a number of “successes” in the form of a range of issue specific agreements (after the 1997 Primakov Memorandum, in the context of the 2005 Yushchenko Plan, as part of the 2010 Meseberg process and in the early days of the Shevchuk administration in Transnistria in the first half of 2012), a settlement remains elusive.

Precarious progress: EU leverage and linkage in Moldova and Transnistria

For the EU in the 1990s, Moldova was but a small blip on the radar. Attention was elsewhere: where the Balkans raged, Moldova simmered. EU diplomatic coverage was from member-state embassies in Moscow. European Commission programmes, once they started, were run from Kyiv. This limited presence was also reflected in EU spending on programmes in Moldova. The EU disbursed €320 million in the period 1991–2006, but the leverage effect of this aid was limited. Approximation to EU norms, in both economic and political domains, did not increase the depth of EU leverage. Without serious presence on the ground and with relatively limited spending, it was difficult to apply any conditionality or to monitor compliance with conditions effectively. It was easy for successive Moldovan governments to proclaim their democratic values and European aspirations without having to follow through on necessary reforms to demonstrate either in practice.

The adoption of the European Security Strategy in 2003 and the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy foresaw a need for a ring of well-governed states around the EU (Whitman and Wolff 2010). Following the accession of Baltic and central European states to the EU in 2004, and of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, Moldova not only became an immediate neighbour of a significantly enlarged EU but the eastern direction of these two rounds of enlargement also brought in new member states that promoted a more active approach by the EU. This was most visible in the Eastern Partnership initiative

launched in 2009. As a result, funding for Moldova increased dramatically (from around €40m per year in 2007 to €131m by 2014), as did the presence of the EU and (partly through increased membership) its member states in Chisinau. As problems developed with other countries covered by the Eastern Partnership (and similarly in the southern dimension of the ENP), Moldova came to be seen as a model student.¹¹ Increased presence, funding, and more strategic engagement gradually were reflected in enhanced linkages and the use of leverage by the EU over the first nearly decade-and-a-half of the 21st century. This, unsurprisingly, increased competition with Russia in the shared neighbourhood (Tolstrup 2013).

While EU engagement with Moldova developed across the board, the change was particularly noteworthy in that the EU became more interested in a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. In the period between 1992, when Transnistria was established as a de facto separate entity on the left bank of the River Nistru, and 2002, the EU left the conflict settlement process essentially to the OSCE. But from 2002, when the EU first sent representatives to joint Transnistrian-Moldova constitutional discussions, there was a more active approach, aided by the expectation that, with the accession to the EU of Romania, the problem would be on the borders of the EU and pose a challenge to the EU's vision of a stable neighbourhood.

A prime example, and perhaps the high-point of the use of leverage during the first decade of the 2000s, of western leverage was the last-minute decision by President Voronin in November 2003 not to sign an agreement on the Transnistrian issue devised by Russian presidential representative Dmitry Kozak. The EU and US view was that the agreement would allow Transnistria (and thus Russia) to paralyse any new government, exert a veto on key foreign policy decisions, and allow Russian forces in Transnistria to stay on. Voronin was heavily pressured, over the phone, by then EU High Representative Javier Solana and on the ground by the US Ambassador to Moldova (Hill 2012, 149–153).

Western leverage at the time, however, was also enhanced by domestic factors. The publication of the settlement proposal triggered anti-government demonstrations in Chisinau at a time when the Rose Revolution in Georgia was in full swing. Moreover, the proposed settlement would have established an almost indefinite Russian military presence in Moldova that would have significantly increased Russian leverage (Hill 2012, 156) on the basis of consolidated and expanded linkages. Given this prospect, and perceiving a real domestic threat to his own political survival, Voronin bowed to Western pressure.

Voronin's subsequent turn towards the EU marks the beginning of a process that saw a number of developments that combined to deepen the relationship between Moldova and the EU. Having snubbed President Putin over the Kozak memorandum, Voronin had effectively committed Moldova to a more pro-European policy. Although he favoured the process (and funds) of the ENP over a thorough adoption of EU values, the EU's leverage gradually increased in absolute terms as well as relative to Russia. And so did linkages across different sectors, especially at political and economic levels.

The EU granted Autonomous Trade Preferences to Moldova in 2008, enabling most Moldovan goods (including those from Transnistrian companies registered in Chisinau) to enter the EU duty-free and mostly quota-free. Subsequent negotiations with the EU for a DCFTA from 2012 brought about a counter-offer from Russia, which suggested Moldova would be better off joining the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan customs union, and warnings from Russian officials of problems to come.¹² While there was a positive response

from the Communist Party and others in Chisinau, the post-2009 AEI government continued towards initialling of a DCFTA at Vilnius in November 2013 and signature in June 2014,¹³ underlining its clear political orientation towards the EU.¹⁴ Yet, the EU was itself changing and momentum for further enlargement had visibly diminished by 2014. With the possibility of EU membership for Moldova being seen by some in Chisinau as a myth,¹⁵ EU leverage in the form of the lure of assured membership also decreased.

The pattern of linkages in Moldova is complex. There is foreign investment in Moldova from the EU, but Russian companies hold key assets; trade with the EU has expanded, but the Russian market remains important. Moldovan exports to the EU have grown from only 20% of all its exports in 2000 to 46% by 2014, while exports to Russia had fallen to 26% by 2014, largely due to Russian import restrictions.¹⁶

Public attitudes reflect this complexity. According to a 2009 survey, 62% of right-bank Moldovans saw the EU in a positive light (a November 2011 survey reduces this to 47%), but 59% of Moldovans also see Russia positively. A survey in January 2014 showed a fall in support for the EU (at 44%), with a similar percentage favouring joining the Customs Union (40%). The drop in enthusiasm for the EU is attributed by commentators in Chisinau as being due to poor communication towards the public on the part of the EU.¹⁷

Similarly, “political” linkage in right-bank Moldova is, while strong, limited to the pro-European political elite in the capital and does not (or no longer) extend to either the Communist Party or to lower layers of the administration outside Chisinau. That said, contact with the EU has become extensive in both depth and breadth. Moldovan ministers are frequently in Brussels and other EU capitals, interaction by officials is now frequent across the board as Moldovans struggle with the all-pervasive *acquis communautaire* in the context of the implementation of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA. Most Moldovan ministries host an EU expert.

In terms of social linkages, the influence of Moldova’s large diaspora has increased awareness of the better life abroad. Many want to achieve a “European lifestyle” by working in the EU. In addition, visa free travel to the EU’s Schengen zone, available since April 2014, has been a key prize for Moldovan political elites and is a key factor in further increasing social linkages. While an Association Agreement is valuable in national terms, there is little tangible for ordinary Moldovan citizens,¹⁸ and the DCFTA entails both opportunities and risks for Moldovan businesses. Visa free access, in contrast, is recognised as an attractive, immediate, and useful good: 200,000 Moldovans visited the EU under the new regime in the first four months of operation. Such linkage has also strengthened existing and created new constituencies to exert leverage. While the usual effect of social linkages is informal, and mediated through family and friends, Moldovan diaspora organisations have become overt political actors. Diaspora groups in Spain, Italy, and the US have called (as early as April 2012) upon the AEI coalition government to press ahead with legislation outlawing sexual (and other forms of) discrimination, as required by the EU and the Council of Europe.¹⁹ This was specifically to counter the Communist Party and the Orthodox Church, which oppose LGBT rights. The Orthodox Church in Moldova, part of the Russian patriarchate, represents another long-embedded Russian linkage.²⁰

The European Commission, member states, and multilateral bodies have provided extensive funding and training for government and NGOs on the practice of democracy during the first decade of the 2000s and into the second decade, when, as a result of

increased ground presence, the EU and member states made available ample funding and travel opportunities for NGOs. Given the small number of people involved in politics, journalism and advocacy, and the relatively high level of education (for example English language skills), urban civil society gained greatly in strength through the decade. By 2009, many civil society leaders had joined EU-based and other international networks, enabling an effective response to the alleged electoral fraud in the April 2009 parliamentary elections. However, such linkage remained limited to relatively few “elite”, Chisinau-based civil society actors, and linkage “effects” of increased EU funding for civil society were more limited outside the capital.

In contrast to even the limited success stories detailed above, linkage in relation to media remains weak. During the Voronin era, media critical of his government were likely to be harassed. This often took the form of defamation lawsuits, but also included attempts to remove the licence of the only non-state TV channel which did not support the government, and it took direct pressure from the EU for Pro TV to retain its licence. Under the AEI, in April 2012 the broadcasting council refused to renew the licence of broadcaster NIT, citing its bias towards the Communist Party. A restructuring of cable TV channels in 2014, removing three channels from several cable TV packages, brought warnings from the OSCE and others on the dangers of limiting press freedom.²¹

The influence of western media is countered by a very strong Russian media presence: most Moldovans prefer the excitement of Russian TV channels to the rather staid and parochial Moldovan TV. The Russian print media dominates.²² A meeting of parliament on the threats to Moldova on 19 March 2014 identified Russian TV channels as the main source of news for Moldovans.²³ The Audiovisual Council undertook to monitor their output and suspended Rossiya 24 for six months and sanctioned other channels.²⁴ There appears little will and capacity to build an attractive Moldovan and Russian-language counter-offer to the predominance of pro-Russian print and electronic media. Moldovan authorities’ resort to tactics that limit the freedom of media suggests a degree of EU linkage “failure”, namely the failure to entrench democratic norms and values, such as respect for media freedom.

The ability of the EU to exert influence over Transnistria is considerably more limited. Having been largely absent as an actor in its own right from the conflict settlement process until the early 2000s, the EU (and US) joined the OSCE-led negotiating format as an official observer in 2005. Given its heretofore limited presence on the ground, and drawing lessons from the 2003 experience with the Kozak Memorandum, the EU appointed a Special Representative for Moldova to be principally concerned with the Transnistrian issue (Adriaan Jacobovits 2005–2007, Kalman Mizsei 2007–2011). This enabled the EU to build up contact with Transnistrian leaders, and a means of starting its own process of confidence building, with Commission financial support.

When post-Kozak talks showed no sign of progressing, the EU strategy was to “change facts on the ground”, building linkages (in the form of creating western-style institutions in Ukraine and Moldova) and leverage (in gaining control for Moldova of the unregulated border between Transnistria and Ukraine). The Orange Revolution in Ukraine facilitated the establishment of the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in 2005. Starting with 70 EU staff, the operation has now grown to over 100 EU staff, some 120 local staff in Ukraine and Moldova, and a biannual budget of €21 million. Achieving control over the Transnistrian segment of the Ukraine–Moldova border has enabled Chisinau to implement

an agreement under which Kyiv only recognises Chisinau's customs documents. As a result, Transnistrian companies have to be registered in Chisinau for exports to Ukraine and the CIS. This translated into highly effective leverage, further enhanced through the incentives offered by the granting of ATP status to Moldova in 2008. It also increased economic linkage between Transnistria and the EU, with 29% of Transnistrian exports going to EU markets in 2012. This was higher than exports to Russia at 22.2%. Including exports to Moldova of around 35% of all Transnistrian exports, effectively creates an enormous economic dependency for Transnistria in the context of the DCFTA. As ATP rights for Transnistrian companies were extended until December 2015, a window of opportunity was created to exert further leverage and enhance linkages in order to tie Transnistrian economic actors (and their political masters and allies) closer into the EU orbit as the removal of trading privileges with the EU after 2015 would be a severe blow to Transnistrian exporters, who in turn provide significant tax revenue to the Transnistrian administration. Yet, the lack of flexibility so far on the part of the EU to find compromise solutions and the counter-leverage that Russia exercises, the closing of this window without a solution will be a severe blow to EU influence over Transnistria instead.

Little has been achieved by the EU in relation to linkage and leverage in the political sphere. In February 2008, the EU lifted its five-year long visa ban on selected members of the Transnistrian administration considered to be less hard-line, which made it possible to invite the then Speaker of the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet, Yevgeny Shevchuk, to visit European capitals. Since Shevchuk's ascendance to the Transnistrian presidency, such visits by him and other senior officials have increased, but this has not resulted in a significant increase of either linkage or leverage, because the scope for conditionality and the incentives that the EU can offer are limited in absolute terms and relative to what Russia has invested. The EU's and member states' projects in Transnistria may bring benefits to the population, but the linkage effect is small and most of the Transnistrian population remains firmly oriented towards Russia and suspicious of the EU. This is due to the fact that most Transnistrian residents (as most residents on the right bank) watch Russian TV, and there has been little movement by the Moldovan government to project EU or Moldovan TV or radio into Transnistria. Transnistrian holders of Moldovan passports are able to access visa free travel to the Schengen area.²⁵ Yet, historically links to Russia remain strong and there is ample scope to travel to Russia, facilitated by a Russian consulate in Tiraspol, a presence which also encourages Transnistrians to take up Russian citizenship²⁶.

Where EU linkage has seen some progress is with the creation of programmes to bring together ordinary citizens on each bank to build up contacts. Member states' embassies have also created linkages between the EU and Transnistrian civil society, for example bringing together young people from both sides of the River Nistru in the "Transnistrian Dialogues" and facilitating organised visits to Brussels. The EU itself began to build up projects in Transnistria with the Support to Civil Society programme from 2009. EU funding was extended to projects in Transnistria, as a proportion of EU aid for Moldova: potentially this was up to 15% of the Euro 273 million earmarked for Moldova from the European Neighbourhood programme 2011–2013.

Yet, such outreach activities aimed at increasing cooperation between Transnistrian and Moldovan NGOs and enhancing people-to-people contacts have become more restricted since late 2012, primarily as a result of an unwillingness to engage on the

part of the Transnistrian authorities, who, in turn, are under significant Russian pressure to limit access to, and for, civil society activists. EU-funded projects have also been insufficient in quantity and quality to counteract the weighty Russian linkage (supported by substantial leverage) found there.

EU linkage and leverage have, over the past decade-and-a-half, increased to some extent on both banks of the River Nistru, but they have had only a limited and not necessarily positive effect on the trajectory of the conflict settlement process. While the right bank has clearly moved closer to the EU, and would be susceptible to EU leverage for a settlement of the conflict, there has been no similarly strong increase of EU leverage and linkage on the left bank. In fact, the growth of EU linkages on the right bank, driven by the democracy promotion agenda embedded in the ENP, has strengthened the divisions between the two banks, and on the right bank itself.

Sufficient blockage: Russian linkage and leverage in Moldova and Transnistria

Russian linkage and leverage in Moldova and Transnistria is almost a mirror image of the EU's: larger (and increasing) on the left bank, and comparatively smaller on the right bank. As with the EU, however, the exercise of Russian influence is played out as part of a greater geopolitical game in the shared neighbourhood, with the Transnistrian conflict being simultaneously affected by geopolitical considerations and being of significant instrumental value in their pursuit.

Moscow's leverage is based on economic foundations in a similar way that the EU's is, owing to the many weaknesses and dependencies of the Moldovan and Transnistrian economies. For example, Russia was opposed to Moldova joining the European Energy Community, primarily because of the requirement for "unbundling" which means that Russian energy giant Gazprom would have to lose its substantial stake in Moldovagaz, when what Gazprom really wants is to increase its stake in, or even own Moldovagaz outright. Russia combined pressure with incentives, even linking the European Energy Community with its own geopolitical project in the neighbourhood, the Customs Union. The then Russian Ambassador to Moldova Valerii Kuzmin, for example argued that joining the customs union could mean Moldovans receiving cheaper gas. Despite becoming a member of the Energy Community, Moldova suspended implementation of the underpinning agreement until 2020. As a "reward", a visit by Moldovan Economy Minister Lazar to Moscow in September 2013 resulted in an agreement with Gazprom to extend the 2011 gas supply contract, with prices remaining at 2011 levels. At the same time, these incentives also increase Russian leverage. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin warned in September 2013 that Moldova's drawing closer to the EU might affect gas prices, demonstrating how Russia seeks to use its economic leverage for political gain.

There are two further economic aspects of Russian linkages which can facilitate leverage: Russian investments in Moldova and Moldovan labour migrants in Russia. Russia has been the largest single foreign investor in Moldova, with its share in FDI slightly increasing from 23% in 2009 to 24% in 2013, and the absolute total reaching \$787m in 2013 (up from \$595m in 2009),²⁷ with further significant Russian investment in, and control of, the banking sector.²⁸ There are also pro-Russian businessmen who use part of their wealth

to further pro-Russian political agendas,²⁹ such as promotion of membership in the Kremlin's Eurasian Union.³⁰

As noted earlier, Moldova is highly dependent on remittances to balance its trade deficit. While remittances from Russia have decreased over the years, and are now worth only around half of remittances from EU countries, the Russian announcement in September 2013 that it might repatriate some 190,000 Moldovan migrant workers, allegedly working in Russia in violation of immigration rules, could be potentially devastating for Moldova's economy and social fabric. In April 2014, the Russian embassy in Chisinau increased the stakes even further stating that up to 250,000 of the 573,000 Moldovans in Russia might be expelled.³¹ While these expulsions have not taken place so far, their very mention stokes fear in Moldova and underlines the vulnerability to Moscow's threats.

A final aspect of Russian leverage with an economic basis are Russian import restrictions on Moldovan exports. As a form of leverage on Moldova, however, their effectiveness has decreased. The Russian share of Moldovan wine exports, for example, fell from 50% in 2005 to 10% in 2007. When Russia announced it would restrict wine (and spirits) imports in September 2013, Chisinau was less concerned than previously. Moreover, the move backfired as the EU responded immediately by increasing quotas for Moldovan wines from 1 January 2014.³²

It is important to note that much of this played out in the period after 2012, and in particular in the period between the run-up to the Vilnius summit in late 2013, when Moldova initialled its Association Agreement and DCFTA, and their actual signing half a year later in June 2014. Throughout this period, right-bank Moldova experienced significant Russian pressure – through actual economic sanctions (import embargoes, gas price pressure and reducing vital remittances) and more (or in some cases less) subtle threats, warning of certain inevitable consequences of Moldova's choice of turning towards the EU and away from Russia.³³

The direct effectiveness of Russian leverage on the government in Chisinau, however, is questionable. Embattled though it is, the AEI government has so far stuck with its pro-EU course, while many of its problems, such as the protracted coalition negotiations in the aftermath of the November 2014 elections, the split of the Liberal-Democratic Party, the short-lived premiership of Chiril Gaburici (February–June 2015), the prolonged coalition negotiations before the appointment of Valeriu Strelet as prime minister at the end of July 2015, and the lost no-confidence vote at the end of October 2015 are in large part due to rivalries in the pro-European camp. At the same time, Moldova has also been engulfed in a major crisis in its banking sector that has exposed the endemic corruption across state institutions and supposedly rival political parties. While the scandal over the "vanishing" of approximately \$1bn (one-eighth of Moldova's annual GDP) also reflects the pervasive presence and influence of Russian interests in the country, it has further undermined public confidence in, and support for, the AEI coalition government.³⁴

That said, the exertion of Russian leverage, or the threat thereof, has contributed to consolidating and enhancing the already significant linkages that have their basis in a shared history, a widely spoken common language, and the continuing existence of political, social, and economic links between Russia and Moldova as evidenced above. Russia has thus managed to further entrench the deep social, political, cultural, and regional cleavages in Moldova. This may not have increased its leverage over the current Moldovan government, but it has been sufficient to prevent any further meaningful European

integration. In fact, the systemic political crisis that Moldova has experienced since 2009 and the critical weakness of its core state institutions (especially the judicial system, the central bank, and civil service) that underpins it, have indirectly decreased EU political (and economic) leverage. This became most evident in July 2015 when the inability of Moldovan institutions to deliver on key reform commitments in the context of the ongoing crisis in the banking sector led to the suspension of EU budget support – illustrating at once the frustration of the EU with Moldova and its inability to turn leverage into tangible reform progress.

In addition to the linkages and leverage that Russia has exercised in right-bank Moldova, it has also used the Transnistrian conflict to consolidate its overall position vis-à-vis Moldova. Russia has so far reined in Transnistrian moves to become an independent state and continued to emphasise the need for a settlement that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Moldova within its 1991 borders, preferring, for the moment, to keep the region as an unstable irritant to the West.³⁵ However, statements by Transnistrian politicians concerning the entity's independence or integration into Russia, unlikely to happen without prior Russian approval, if not outright encouragement, put additional pressure on Chisinau.³⁶ The assumption is that this will increase Moldovan acceptance of reintegration of Transnistria on Russian terms such that Moscow's influence would extend over the whole of Moldova, akin to the precedent set by the Kozak Memorandum in 2003.

Simultaneously, the Kremlin has prevented any substantial progress in the OSCE-sponsored 5 + process after some modest successes in the first half of 2012.³⁷ Similarly, there has also been pressure on Latin-script Romanian language schools in Transnistria coinciding with Moldovan advances towards the DCFTA³⁸, and calls by Transnistria to remove Moldovan officials based in the security zone of Bender/Tighina, which is under the control of Tiraspol.³⁹

Leverage is also exercised through rumours of Russian intervention stretching from eastern Ukraine westwards towards Odessa and Transnistria.⁴⁰ Statements from NATO that Russia had such a capability caused some alarm in Chisinau.⁴¹ There were also Russian pundits who said a Russian absorption of Transnistria could parallel Russian action in Crimea.⁴²

In a similar way to using Transnistria as leverage against the Moldovan government, additional pressure on right-bank Moldova has come from Gagauzia, an autonomous region in the south of Moldova. Traditionally a region with strong connections to Russia, Gagauzia sought to increase those connections after 2012 as Chisinau moved closer to the EU in the context of progressing negotiations on the Association Agreement and DCFTA.⁴³ In February 2015, the authorities in Komrat held a referendum in which, at a turnout of 70%, 98.4% of voters supported closer relations with the emerging Eurasian Customs Union, while 97.2% simultaneously opposed closer EU integration. At the same time, 98.9% of voters in the same referendum endorsed Gagauzia's right to hold a referendum on its independence should Moldova's sovereign status change. While not legally binding, and in fact declared illegal by a district court in Gagauzia's capital Komrat, the vote illustrates the attraction of Russia's "offer" (manifest, for example, in selectively lifting embargoes on agricultural imports from the Gagauzia region only) and the limited appeal that the EU and the pro-European policy of the Moldovan government have in Gagauzia.⁴⁴ Balti, in the north of Moldova, and other localities also experienced civil unrest said to be supported by Russia, under a "smouldering peat" operation.⁴⁵

This leverage of Russia over Moldova through the instrumentalisation of the Transnistrian conflict has been facilitated by the leverage Russia has over Transnistria, again primarily based on the economic dependencies of the Transnistrian economy which would collapse without Russian aid. Transnistria has a significant budget deficit (some \$200 million annually), and is dependent on Russia to plug the gap either through budget support to the administration or through subsidies paid out to the population, for example in direct payments to pensioners, which further reinforces already strong linkages. Transnistria also receives cheap gas from Russia without which most Transnistrian manufacturing would not remain profitable. Since what little income the Transnistrian administration receives through taxation comes from just a handful of these plants, without these Russian subsidies the administration would collapse.

However, Russia does not simply pressure Transnistria, but there are genuine social, cultural, economic, and political linkages that complement and sustain Russian leverage. Thus, social and cultural orientation towards Russia combines with fear of Romanianisation. Russian economic support and financial investment, as well as persistent strong trade links, contrast with wide-spread fear that closer Moldovan ties with the EU will have a significant detrimental impact on the Transnistrian economy and residents' living standards, as well as their cultural identity. While political linkage between Russia and Transnistria at times may have been tenuous and strained under the presidency of Vladimir Voronin, it has consolidated under his successor Shevchuk and it still is significantly stronger than any linkages with the EU.

Russia's linkage and leverage over both Moldova and Transnistria, and the way it uses them to exert influence, thus, remain an effective tool of Russian policy: the blockage the Kremlin can create in particular through the instrumentalisation of the Transnistrian conflict is sufficient to exercise a veto on full Moldovan integration with the EU (and perhaps even more importantly for Russia, NATO). Put differently, Russia either needs to achieve a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict such that it can maintain a sufficient foothold in Moldovan politics to shape the country's geopolitical orientation, or block any further westward move of Moldova by keeping the Transnistrian conflict unresolved. In the context of the intensifying geopolitical competition between Russia and the West in the shared neighbourhood (and beyond), the former is hardly a realistic option as long as the EU can use its leverage and linkage on the right bank to frustrate Russian efforts in this respect. This leaves the latter as the default policy choice for Moscow.

Conclusion

The extent of influence exercised by the lead players in the Transnistrian conflict, the EU (and US), on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, has been a function of the level of their cooperation or rivalry in the wider global context and how this has played out in their efforts to exert leverage on Moldova. This has been evident in the effectiveness or otherwise of efforts to resolve the Transnistrian issue.

This pattern of so far ultimately unsuccessful conflict settlement efforts can be explained by linking the existence and use of linkage and leverage by great powers to the degree of rivalry between them. During the period between the 1997 Primakov Memorandum and the failed Kozak plan, relations between Russia and the West were initially relatively "harmonious" in the late Yeltsin period. Combined with the fairly limited interest

that the US and EU displayed in Moldova at that time, and the more positive relations between Chisinau, Tiraspol and Moscow at the time, a large number of agreements on specific issues of the relationship between Moldova and Transnistria were negotiated (although their status and degree of implementation remains matter of debate to this day). As relations between Russia and the West became tenser in the wake of Putin's rise to power, Moldova became a more important part of geostrategic considerations by both sides, not least in the context of the eastward expansion of NATO in 1999 and in 2004 and of the EU in 2004 that brought both organisations to the borders of Russia. The limited leverage the West had over the government in Chisinau was sufficient to stymie Russian efforts to gain a permanent foothold in all of Moldova through the Kozak plan.

Moldova's European turn after 2003 in combination with the further eastward expansion of the EU in 2007, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Yushchenko Plan increased Western linkages and leverage, but simultaneously heightened the intensity of competition with Russia. The ill-fated attempt by Chisinau to implement the Yushchenko Plan (by unilaterally passing a law on the status of Transnistria) was vehemently rejected by Tiraspol and Moscow, and formal negotiations in the OSCE-led format broke down in 2006.

An initially promising but in the end failing rapprochement between Russia and the EU in the context of the Meseberg process from 2010 onwards, saw Russia and the West agree on the need to reopen formal negotiations in the 5 + format and use their linkage and leverage to bring Chisinau and Tiraspol together at the negotiations table. Initial progress in the talks in 2011–2012 was further helped by regime change on both sides of the River Nistru in 2009 and 2011, respectively. Yet, the optimism about a settlement quickly dissipated as geopolitical rivalry once more increased after the reinstatement of Putin into the Russian presidency, the failure of the US "reset", and the intensification of negotiations between the EU and Moldova on an Association Agreement (alongside similar processes elsewhere in the shared neighbourhood, in Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia). Consequently, the OSCE-facilitated settlement process gradually slowed down after 2012 and has now ground to a halt in the context of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, in itself an indication of the new ferocity of geopolitical competition in the post-Soviet region.

Yet, geopolitical considerations to one side, the effectiveness of influence has also been determined by the extent of linkage and leverage that both sides had built up over time. Thus, while we can explain events in Moldova within the framework of Levitsky and Way's theory of democratisation, we have also demonstrated how this theory can be modified to apply the concepts of linkage and leverage to competitive influence-seeking by rival powers in systemically weak and divided states.

Using this conceptualisation of events in Moldova over the past ten years, we argued that both Russia and the EU have been able to use leverage and linkage in pursuit of their interests. The EU, starting from a much lower base than Russia for a variety of primarily historical reasons and legacy effects, has managed to increase both leverage and linkage in relation to right-bank Moldova, but much less so in relation to the left bank. The EU's increased engagement with Moldova, however, has been primarily driven by an economic agenda and manifested itself in the drawn-out process of negotiating an Association Agreement, including a DCFTA. Put differently, the EU has failed to extend political and other linkages beyond a core group of Moldovan politicians and civil society

activists, partly because the Commission-driven DCFTA agenda failed to grasp the complexities and nuances of Moldova's political landscape. In the absence of broadly based and different types of salient linkages, leverage is ultimately limited, especially if there is a strong and at least partially attractive alternative available, as has been the case in the shape of Russia.

In the context of the kind of great-power competition that has been played out in Moldova, EU efforts to increase linkages have thus not resulted in sufficient levels of leverage to neutralise Russian influence. While this Russian influence may have declined relative to that of the EU on the right bank, it has remained substantial there, as evident from the results of the November 2014 parliamentary elections in Moldova. Equally importantly, Russian linkage and leverage have not only had an impact on maintaining social, cultural, and political cleavages in Moldova and between societies on both banks of the River Nistru but they have also contributed to the persistence of weak state institutions incapable of effective reform, which in turn diminishes the effectiveness of Western leverage.

On the left bank, EU linkage and leverage pale in comparison to Russia. In contrast to the EU, and as a result of its far greater influence on Tiraspol, Moscow has been able to instrumentalise the Transnistrian conflict in order to increase further its leverage over Chisinau.

In a country that is as divided along salient cleavages of language, culture, and geopolitical orientation as Moldova, and suffers from a chronic and systemic weakness of its institutions, this particular kind of geopolitical competition cannot but significantly and negatively affect the prospects of conflict settlement. Not only has the gulf between the left and the right bank of the River Nistru increased but the differences between Moscow and Brussels over the conflict also appear more profound than ever in the period after the end of the Cold War. Consequently, the Transnistrian conflict has become far less resolvable.

Notes

1. We treat Western linkage and leverage from the EU and the US as a single influence on Moldova. For example, Victoria Nuland, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs at the State Department, stated in January 2014 that the United States has 'been extremely supportive of the Eastern Partnership and the opportunity that the European Union has given to countries to its East for association with the EU, for free trade association, and visa-free travel opportunity. We think this is an enormous positive for countries like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.' Imedia, Moldova 11 January 2014.
2. Beyer was British Ambassador to Moldova 2006–2009, during which time he built up several pioneering projects to establish connections between the communities of Transnistria and right-bank Moldova. In 2011, he undertook a field study of popular attitudes to Transnistria's reintegration in Moldova under the EU-funded People's Peacemaking Perspectives, sponsored by NGO Saferworld (Beyer 2011). This included the first focus group studies in Transnistria by a Western researcher. Wolff has been a consultant to successive Moldova governments, the OSCE Mission to Moldova, the Irish and Ukrainian OSCE Chairmanships, the EU Special Representative, Kalman Mizsei, the EU Delegation to Moldova and the British Embassy in Chisinau since 2003. He researched and wrote a report for the European Parliament on the Transnistrian conflict (Wolff 2012) and subsequently carried out a gap analysis of the Moldovan government's Bureau for Reintegration on behalf of the EU Delegation in Chisinau. Both studies drew on more than 20 confidential interviews each with representatives of the Moldovan

government, the Transnistrian authorities, and international officials in Chisinau, Vienna, Brussels, London, Berlin, New York, and Washington.

3. For a range of relevant open-source reports by Wolff on the Transnistrian settlement process, see <http://www.stefanwolff.com/publications/reports-on-transnistria>. Wolff has additionally been involved with the Gagauzian issue, advising the Legal Department of the Moldovan Parliament on the interpretation of the 1995 Special Status Law for Gagauzia (2004–2007) and working with EUSR Kalman Mizsei on a resolution to the 2007 post-election crisis in Gagauzia. Open source reports on Gagauzia authored by Wolff, can be accessed via <http://www.stefanwolff.com/publications/reports-on-gagauzia>.
4. While we recognize the debate regarding the distinction between “exporting democracy” and “promoting democracy” (Diamond 1992), we use the term “promotion” in relation to the relevant efforts of both democratic and autocratic regimes. See also Lowenthal (1991) and Carothers (1999).
5. We acknowledge that there is some debate over the degree to which external factors can account for domestic regime change or consolidation, that is, whether autocracy or democracy promotion have any causal effect. This debate is covered, among others, by Agné (2012), Bridoux and Russell (2013), Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2006), Goldsmith (2001), Knack (2004), Lindberg (2006), Paxton and Morishima (2005), Przeworski et al. (2000), Teorell and Hadenius (2009), and Wahman (2012).
6. See also Ambrosio (2010), Tolstrup (2009).
7. According to World Bank data available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=MDA&series=&period=>
8. 370,000 are recorded as working abroad for over a 12-month period, 206,000 of them in Russia. NEXUS Moldova study, Imedia 25 October 2013.
9. According to World Bank data available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=MDA&series=&period=>
10. While Shevchuk had visited EU capitals, his election did not depend on any EU influence.
11. Estonian President Hendrik Ilves said that Moldova was one of the most successful states in the Eastern Partnership, quoted in Imedia 18 October 2013. See also Eckart Stratenschulte, IPN 21 May 2014.
12. Russia’s permanent representative to the EU Vladimir Cijov warned that Moldova’s signature of an association agreement with the EU “could generate problems”, quoted by Kyiv-based Obozrevatel.com, 14 January 2014.
13. Moldova could not join both; requirements of the customs union would not be compatible with DCFTA commitments or indeed WTO requirements, since Moldova would have to adjust its tariffs. Moldova’s accession on 10 October 2011 to the CIS free trade area is however compatible, a point reaffirmed at a meeting of CIS economy ministers in Moscow on 13 March 2014, see Imedia 10–17 March 2014.
14. Moldovan parliament speaker Corman noted at a meeting of his Eastern Partnership peers that recognition of the European perspective, at least for countries like Moldova, which are determined to follow the European path and which have obtained good results in this regard, will consolidate the pro-European forces in these countries.” Imedia, 7 April 2014.
15. Commentator Dmitri Ciubesenca wrote that “so-called European integration is a myth because nobody is planning on accepting Ukraine or Moldova into the EU. Zombified politicians from governments in Kyiv and Chisinau can practice auto-training in the mirror as much as they want, telling themselves we are European and we will get an integration perspective, but nobody is planning on allowing these countries in the EU”. Panorama, 11 April 2014.
16. According to European Commission data available at http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113419.pdf.
17. Victor Chirila, director of the Association for Foreign Policy commented: “if these reforms were explained properly, confidence in them would have been higher. I would like EU partners to understand that the soft power they promote in our region can be successful when it can match the tough instruments of the Russian Federation” Adevarul, 13 February 2014.

18. "The benefits of the association agreement will not be immediate for the majority of society in the first few years. Consequently, the mobilization of the political class and society will be extremely difficult". Editorial in *Adevarul*, 24 June 2014.
19. *Imedia* 26 April 2012.
20. The church synod declared that the EU was pro-gay: "The West is ignoring God's orders and interdictions", *Imedia* 4 September 2014.
21. Dunja Mijatović, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, said: "The unilateral decision to stop retransmission of these three channels can curb media freedom and limit media pluralism in Moldova, not least since these channels were known for their critical reporting on the current government." The channels were Accent TV, RTR Moldova and Jurnal TV. *Imedia* 10 January 2014.
22. Over 70% of newspapers distributed in Moldova are in Russian. In 2013, a total of 7.4 million newspapers and over 180,000 magazines were distributed in Moldova, of which 73% were in Russian and 27% were in Romanian, according to data from the Bureau to Audit Circulation and the Internet. *Agora.md*, 12 May 2014.
23. LDP deputy Vadim Vacarciuc said that "people in Moldova are too influenced by Russian mass media", and that countermeasures needed to be taken. *Imedia* 20 March 2014; cf commentator Vadim Vasiliu "Russian propaganda is unstoppable in Moldova ... "Russian TV stations broadcast without any restrictions in Moldova programmes that promote separatism and the annexation of foreign territories". *Jurnal de Chisinau*, 25 March 2014.
24. The BCC noted that the decision was necessary because the channel did not comply with Moldovan legislation on balanced coverage. The media watchdog also applied maximum fines for REN TV Moldova and RTR Moldova, and publicly warned Prime and TV7 for violations. *Imedia*, 4 July 2014.
25. This facility for Transnistrians is seen by Russian observers in terms of linkage. Leonid Slutki, head of the Russian State Duma committee for CIS countries noted that visa free travel to the EU for Transnistrians would test their fidelity towards Russia, *Publika TV*, 4 December 2013.
26. According to Transnistrian President Shevchuk, there are 200,000 Russian passport holders in Transnistria. <http://www.euronews.com/2014/06/07/interview-transnistrian-president-shevchuk-says-he-wants-a-civilised-divorce/>
27. According to the IMF's Coordinated Direct Investment Survey (CDIS) database at <http://data.imf.org/?sk=40313609-F037-48C1-84B1-E1F1CE54D6D5>.
28. Former premier and businessman Ion Sturza said during a TV programme that about 70 percent of Moldovan banks are in reality owned by Russian banks. *Imedia*, 3 July 2014. Economist Mihai Roscovan regrets that governments allowed "the over-penetration of Russian capital in Moldova, since this ... undermines our independence." He reported that nearly 75% of wine factories belong to Russians, as does more than 90% of electricity production. Russian companies also control the petrol market. The only international airport in Moldova was given into concession to Russia for 49 years. *Imedia*, 8 July 2014.
29. Commentator Vitalie Ciobanu noted, "Moscow has powerful leverage over Moldova: the Transnistrian regime, Gagauz separatism, trade embargos, the expulsion of Moldovan workers from Russia ... There are also a number of pro-Russian business people originally from Moldova, 'luxury gastarbeiters' who are creating parties, distributing gifts to pensioners, donating to police stations." *Radio Free Europe*, 20 February 2014.
30. According to Moldovan foreign minister Natalia Gherman, the Party of Communists and the Party of Socialists in Moldova also receive support from Moscow in exchange for promoting integration in the Eurasian Union. *PublikaTV*, 21 May 2014.
31. *Jurnal.md* (10 April 2014) quoting Russian website *mk.ru*
32. Moreover, contradicting Moscow's official line, Russian consumer watchdog Rospotrebnadzor found that Transnistrian wines did meet the required standards (which had been disputed in the initial import restrictions) and said it would consider Gagauzian produce separately, in a press release issued 5 March 2014, quoted by *Imedia* 5 March.
33. In a press interview, Russian Deputy Premier Dmitri Rogozin noted that in Moldova's case "association with the EU is an attempt to join a foreign gang." Moscow will "insist on revising

economic ties with Moldova” and added that “association with the EU involves a change in Moldova’s neutrality status.” “We remember who trampled all over the Kozak memorandum”. Kommersant.md, 12 May 2014.

34. In just a few days the success story of Moldova has turned into the lair of the most perverse thieves ... an entire country is being stripped by ... corruption networks”, Adevarul 21 October 2015. Moldova government collapses amid scandal, Financial Times 29 October 2015.
35. Roman Hudeakov, a deputy from the Russian Liberal Democratic Party made a request to the Russian foreign ministry to recognize Transnistria’s independence or allow it to join Russia. Mr Hudeakov justified his request by the need to not allow “a scenario similar to the one in Ukraine” to happen in Moldova. Hudeakov said that Transnistria is host to over 200,000 Russian citizens. “Now, Transnistria is surrounded by states which are outright hostile and inclined to using force and risks becoming a victim of military annexation by the pro-Romanian government in Moldova.” Imedia, 3 March 2014. Transnistrian Supreme Soviet chairman Mihai Burla allegedly wrote to the Russian Duma asking for legislation similar to that enacted for Crimea to allow Transnistria to join Russia. Vedemosti, 18 March 2014 quoted by Imedia. Commentator Madalin Necsutu wrote that keeping Transnistria in a state of “political limbo” plays into Russia’s geopolitical game. Evenimentul Zilei 20 May 2014.
36. The Transnistrian Supreme Soviet decided on 16 April 2014 to approach the Russian Duma for recognition. Kommersant.md, 15 April 2014.
37. Moreover, the Ukrainian crisis has eliminated any reasonable prospect of progress in these talks for the time being.
38. Ion Iovcev, principal of the Lucian Blaga Romanian high school in Tiraspol, has said that Transnistrian pressures on the school intensified from 5 November 2013, after the pro-European demonstration in Moldova, when it became clear that Moldova would initial the association agreement with the EU. Jurnal de Chisinau, 13 January 2014.
39. Transnistria’s State Security Commission called for the withdrawal from Bender “of all units of police, security forces, and official institutions belonging to Moldova, including the police station in Bender”. Imedia 23 January 2014.
40. Ukrainian Vice-admiral Igor Kabanenko spoke of a Russian planning document which outlines using armed force to create a “control line” along Lugansk-Donetsk-Nikolaev-Odessa-Tiraspol axis, which would block Ukraine’s access to the Black Sea and bring Moldova into the conflict Adevarul, 8 March 2014.
41. General Philip Breedlove, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO Allied Command Operations (SACEUR), said that Russia has enough force at Ukraine’s borders to occupy Transnistria if it wanted to. Imedia, 24 March 2014.
42. Russian political scientist Evgheni Mincenko said that Moscow could use the Crimean precedent to annex Transnistria. Russian portal Novii Region, cited by Ziarul National, 22 April 2014.
43. Commentator Nadine Chilianu wrote that Russia was encouraging separatist movements in Moldova’s south. After a visit to Moscow, the head of the Gagauz legislature Konstantinov said that Moscow would open a consulate in the region, and there would be cuts of 35–50 percent for the cost of Russian gas, and Gagauz citizens will be able to get Russian citizenship more easily. Jurnal de Chisinau, 29 March 2014.
44. EU engagement with Komrat has always been relatively limited, and the Gagauz dimension of the Transnistrian settlement process has been largely neglected. A last-minute visit by then EU enlargement commissioner Stefan Füle in late January 2015, therefore, did nothing to change the minds of Gagauzian voters in the referendum.
45. Commentator Vitali Andrievski expected Russia to create new sources of instability, including in Transnistria, Gagauzia, and Balti. Ava.md, 4 July 2014.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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